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ABSTRACT

California has one of the most diverse societies on earth. Ethnic minorities comprise at least one-third of the state's people, and the society is becoming ever more diverse. It is estimated that by about the year 2010, California will have no majority ethnic group. The historical development of this diversity is traced from the arrival of European settlers, through the Gold Rush migrations and the arrival of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century. Successive waves of Japanese American, Mexican American, and other Asian American groups, especially after the reform of immigration law in 1965, enriched the state's heritage. The Los Angeles (California) and San Francisco (California) metropolitan areas are to the late twentieth century what New York was to the late nineteenth, the primary center of new immigration. (SLD)

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THE NEW IMMIGRANTS AND CALIFORNIA'S MULTIETHNIC HERITAGE

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The New Immigrants and California's Multiethnic Heritage

By Charles Wollenberg, Ph.D.

A Los Angeles restaurant, owned by a Korean with a Guatemalan cook, features "Kosher Burritos." The existence of such an ethnic establishment is a dramatic illustration of the fact that California has one of the most diverse societies on Earth. Where else would someone invent a "Kosher Burrito?"

In the composition of its population, as in so many other things, the Golden State is an exaggerated version of the American experience. If the United States is a multiethnic, multinational, multicultural society, then California is that, and very much more so. Ethnic minorities comprise one-fifth of the U.S. population, but at least a third of California's 28 million people are in that category. This includes about 6 million people of Latin American descent, 2 million Blacks, nearly 2 million Asians and Pacific Islanders and over 200,000 Native Americans. To put these numbers into perspective, California has more people than Canada or all the Scandinavian nations. The 9 to 10 million minority members are more than the populations of all but seven U.S. states. Even 6 million Latinos are more than the populations of any of California's neighboring states: Oregon, Arizona and Nevada.

California's large and diverse society is becoming ever more so. The state's population has grown more than three and a half times since 1940, but the two largest minorities, Latinos and Blacks, have increased more than 10 times during the same period. Since the immigration law reforms of the 1960s and the establishment of Indochinese refugee provisions in the 1970s, the Asian population also has exploded. As a result of these demographic trends, California soon will be the first mainland state with a majority of minorities. Or, to put it another way, by about 2010 the nation's most populous and influential state will have no majority ethnic group.

The change in California demographics is one of degree rather than of kind. For two centuries California has been an ethnically diverse society, created by an on-going process of multiracial migration and immigration. The establishment of Spanish settle-

ment in 1769, for example, caused California Indians to become the region's first "minority group."

Although the mission Indians comprised a numerical majority of Spanish California's population, the Hispanic colonial system dictated that Indians would occupy economic and social roles, such as agricultural laborer, that have been filled by ethnic and national minorities ever since. Moreover, the great majority of the "Spanish" settlers were in fact natives of Mexico. They came from the lower echelons of northwestern Mexican society and were usually of racially mixed "Mestizo" or "Mulato" origin. "Spanish" settlement thus began a process of multiethnic migration north from Mexico that has periodically waxed and waned according to conditions on both sides of the border, but has been an important fact of California life for more than 200 years.

The first English-speaking settlers were also immigrants, in this case to Hispanic California. They were seamen, merchants, trappers and traders, and they opened land and water routes later used by great waves of migration from the previously settled parts of the United States. Thus, even before U.S. rule was formally established in 1848, the two great migration paths that have contributed most to California's population mix were in place. As historian Herbert Bolton observed more than a half century ago, California has long been a demographic "borderland," a meeting ground of the Spanish American northern frontier and the English American western frontier.

The Gold Rush was California's first mass migration. While the majority of gold-seekers were English-speaking Whites from the Eastern United States, the possibility of instant wealth also attracted foreign immigrants and minority group members. Miners from Mexico, Peru and Chile produced a dramatic increase in the state's Latino population. Blacks and Indians from other parts of the United States added to the diversity of Gold Rush society. The migration to the mines also established an important tradition of European immigration. The gold discovery came at a time of very large migrations of Irish and Germans to the United States, and significant numbers of both groups made their way to California. They were joined by important populations from the British Isles and the Scandinavian countries. By the late 19th century, California, like the nation as a whole, was being affected by increasing immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Greeks, Portuguese, Russians, Poles, Armenians and, above all, Italians firmly established themselves in California society.

San Francisco, the Far West's first great city, became a center of European immigrant life. In 1860, San Francisco had the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any U.S. city. By 1880, 60 percent of the bay city's population was of "immigrant stock," either foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents, again the highest such percentage of any U.S. city. Irish immigrants and their children alone made up nearly a third of

San Francisco's residents in 1880. European immigrants were found at every social and economic level of California life, but most of all they were blue-collar workers. The early histories of the Bay Area's working class and powerful labor movement were to a large degree histories of immigrants and their children. And the influence of European immigration was by no means limited to the Bay Area.

Europeans came overland or by ship via New York and Boston. Often they joined the westward movement to California after living for many years on the east coast. Direct passage from Europe was possible but impractical until the Panama Canal was completed in 1914. By that time, World War I and the subsequent imposition of strict immigration quotas greatly reduced the flow of Europeans to America. Asians and Pacific Islanders, on the other hand, came to California directly. For them the state was not only a place to settle but also the major port of entry to America, and so it has remained ever since.

The third great migration path to California, across the Pacific, also began during the Gold Rush. Hawaiians, Australians and New Zealanders were attracted by the largely unfulfilled promise of great wealth. The first significant arrivals of Chinese occurred in 1851 and 1852, thus beginning the tradition of large-scale Asian immigration to the United States. These pioneer Chinese immigrants hoped, like everyone else, to "get rich quick" in the gold fields. But prevailing racial prejudice made it difficult for Chinese to obtain valid mining claims. The immigrants were forced into occupations that served rather than competed with the white miners. In a society with few women (in 1850 there were more than 10 men for every woman in California) Chinese found opportunities in what the 19th century considered "women's work" — laundry, cooking and domestic service. The Chinese also worked mining areas abandoned or overlooked by Whites, established small truck farms, fished in San Francisco and Monterey bays and engaged in unskilled gang labor for wages considerably lower than those paid to Whites. By the time construction began on the transcontinental railroad in 1862, the immigration route from Canton and the tradition of cheap Chinese labor were well established. Employers like the Central Pacific Railroad took full advantage of the fact, profiting immensely from the prevailing anti-Chinese prejudice.

Until the late 1860s, California's Chinese population was concentrated in the mountain counties where mining and railroad construction were centered. But after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the Chinese moved increasingly to other regions of the state. They became an important part of the new farm labor force, helping to lay the foundations of modern agribusiness in the rural valleys of Central and Southern California. They served as crew members on merchant ships and became an increasingly important part of San Francisco's urban workforce.

Unfortunately, this expansion of Chinese activity occurred in the midst of the serious economic depression of the 1870s. As unemployment increased, racial prejudice was combined with perceived economic competition between Asians and Whites. The causes of the economic crisis were complex, but the Chinese were a perfect scapegoat. Groups such as the Workingman's Party raised the level of racist rhetoric and activity. The anti-Chinese movement became an integral part of California politics and public policy, and so it remained for decades, long after the depression of the 1870s and the Workingman's Party were all but forgotten.

The most dramatic impact of the rising tide of anti-Chinese activity was passage by Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The law was the first instance of substantial immigration restriction in American history. Until then the general American practice had been to encourage new arrivals, but 1882 marked the beginning of a 40-year trend of increasingly restrictive policies, culminating in the Quota System Act of 1924. It is no accident that the first group singled out was the only large body of nonwhite immigrants then coming to the United States. Ironically, the Chinese Exclusion Act became law just as the Statue of Liberty was about to be constructed in New York Harbor.

The law, which was periodically renewed and amended, did not end all Chinese immigration. Some illegal arrivals slipped through, and businessmen, students and diplomats were exempted from coverage. In addition, American-born children of Chinese parents were U.S. citizens and thus could not be denied re-entry. Between 1910 and 1940, the federal government operated a facility on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay at which prospective Chinese entrants were detained and examined to determine their eligibility for admission under terms of the Exclusion Act. Nevertheless, the Chinese population declined dramatically, and not until after World War II did the number of people of Chinese descent in California recover to its 1882 level.

California employers, meanwhile, turned to Japan for a new source of Asian immigrant labor. By the early 20th century, the number of Japanese coming to California annually (often by way of Hawaii) roughly equaled the pace of Chinese immigration in the 1870s. The Chinese had come at a time when San Francisco was the Far West's only great urban center, and the bay city naturally became the unofficial capital of Chinese America. But by the time of large-scale Japanese immigration in the early 1900s, Los Angeles had begun a period of remarkable growth, and the southern metropolis became California's chief center of Japanese population. In Southern California's dynamic economy, Japanese immigrants found opportunities in truck farming, produce marketing and fishing, fields already occupied in the Bay Area by Italians and Chinese. San Francisco and parts of Central California were certainly affected by Japanese immigration, but while the bay city's Japanese district was sometimes known as "Little Osaka," Los Angeles' was commonly called "Little Tokyo."

Japanese also replaced Chinese as the chief target of anti-Asian sentiment. Anti-Japanese policies and legislation often coincided with international conflicts and crises in U.S.-Japanese relations. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt attempted to calm the situation by negotiating a "Gentlemen's Agreement" by which the Japanese government pledged to restrict passage of unskilled laborers to the United States. But the agreement did not defuse anti-Japanese feeling in California. Unlike the Chinese, who were primarily "sojourners" intending to return home after a few years in the United States, a significant percentage of Japanese immigrants planned to stay and establish families. The Gentlemen's Agreement only limited the arrival of additional laborers, but Japanese already here sent for wives and children and a large generation of California-born Japanese Americans soon appeared. As the number of people of Japanese descent steadily grew, the anti-Japanese movement remained a potent force in California life.

The tragic outcome of the interrelationship between international conflict abroad and anti-Japanese sentiment at home was President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, issued in early 1942. It provided that all people of Japanese descent living on the west coast, citizens and noncitizens, native and Japanese-born aliens alike, be relocated to camps in the interior. The action was prompted by the attack on Pearl Harbor and justified as a wartime necessity. There is no evidence, however, that the relocation served any valid military or security purpose, nor were similar measures applied to people of German or Italian descent. The action is best explained as the result of anti-Asian fears and stereotypes that stretch back at least to the initial arrival of the Chinese in the 1850s.

By the time of the relocation, Congress had extended the concept of Chinese exclusion to Japan and most of the rest of Asia. The immigration laws of the 1920s represented a substantial victory for the advocates of restriction. Not only was most Asian immigration banned, but quotas were established that favored entrants from northwestern Europe and greatly restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe. The quota system, however, did not apply to Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere, nor did the immigration laws affect the Philippines, then an American territory. While the new laws greatly reduced immigration to the east coast, the effect on California was simply to redirect the process. Increasingly, immigrants from Mexico and the Philippines replaced earlier arrivals from Europe and Asia.

Mexican immigration had declined precipitously after the Gold Rush, but in the early 20th century, the rapid growth of Southern California produced a new flow of people across the border. In particular, construction of the Pacific Electric, the Los Angeles area's vast interurban and street railroad, attracted large numbers of Mexican track workers. Some of the barrios that still exist in Southern California trace their origins back to Pacific Electric labor camps. After 1910, the social and economic upheaval of the

Mexican Revolution produced additional waves of immigration, the new arrivals engaging in unskilled urban and agricultural work as well as track labor. As European and Asian immigration declined in the 1920s, Mexicans became the chief labor source for San Joaquin Valley and Southern California agriculture. Increasing anti-Mexican resentment and discrimination inevitably accompanied the increase in the immigrant population.

Mexicans came overland to California, but like earlier Asian immigrants, Filipinos came by sea, sometimes by way of Hawaii. While Southern California became the center of the Mexican immigrant population, Filipinos were concentrated in the central part of the state, particularly the Bay Area and Delta regions. As was the case for previous trans-Pacific immigrants, Filipinos engaged in unskilled agricultural and urban work as well as domestic employment. And Filipinos became a new target for the anti-Asian movement, which by now had become a staple of California life and culture.

The depression of the 1930s produced a vast labor surplus, and it seemed California no longer needed immigrant workers. Some countries established "repatriation" programs, cutting off relief payments to force Mexicans back across the border. In the mid-1930s, Congress severely restricted further Filipino immigration. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of white Americans, many of them Dust Bowl migrants, joined minorities and immigrants in California fields as farm workers. Indeed, the "Okies" were often treated as if they were an ethnic minority. In spite of their white, Anglo-Saxon, Midwestern background, they found themselves in an economic and social situation normally reserved for minorities and immigrants in California life, and were treated accordingly.

The extraordinary economic expansion produced by World War II transformed the labor surplus of the 1930s into a severe worker shortage. In 1942, the United States and Mexico established the Bracero Program, a bilateral agreement allowing Mexicans to cross the border and work on U.S. farms and railroads. The program continued under various guises until 1964. In addition to the braceros, thousands of other Mexicans came to California, as the border was left virtually open during the war years. Equally dramatic internal migrations occurred, including a mass movement of Blacks to the state. California's Black heritage stretches back to Spanish times, but the origins of most of the state's great urban Black communities are the labor demands of World War II. San Francisco's Black population, for example, grew by more than five times between 1940 and 1945, and by the end of the war, well over half of the Bay Area's Black wage earners were employed in just one industry — the wartime shipyards. While Blacks were internal migrants rather than foreign immigrants, they faced many of the problems and prejudices traditionally encountered by immigrant minorities in California.

In spite of substantial conflict produced by the dynamic wartime population mix and

the horror of Japanese relocation, World War II marks an important turning point in American and Californian race relations. Adolf Hitler gave racism a bad name, and overtly racist arguments no longer could be made in respectable publications. Equal rights for all regardless of race became an established national principle, and Blacks and other minorities made increasingly militant efforts to turn that principle into practical reality. In 1943, Congress symbolically ended the Asian exclusion policy by granting America's wartime ally, China, a token quota of 100 immigrants per year. After the war, the Philippines and Japan received similar tiny quotas. In addition, Filipinos who had served in the U.S. armed forces were allowed to settle in America.

The great change in immigration policy, however, came in 1965 as a result of a comprehensive reform of the immigration law. That was also the year of the end of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement and of the Watts riot and the Delano farm workers' strike, as well as of important civil rights legislation and the escalation of the Vietnam War. In the midst of such momentous events, Congress abolished the old quota system with its built-in bias in favor of northwestern Europe. A total annual limit of about 300,000 immigrants remained but, in general, individuals were to be admitted according to a preference system emphasizing family ties and occupation. Under the terms of subsequent legislation, no single nation was to contribute more than 20,000 immigrants per year.

The most important effect of the new laws was to give Asia equal status with Europe in U.S. immigration policy. For California this meant a new era of large-scale Chinese, Filipino and Korean immigration. Refugee provisions for Indo-China, established in the 1970s, produced additional large migrations from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. California has been the principal destination for this new wave of Asian immigration, just as it was for the earlier, trans-Pacific arrivals. As a group, Asians and Pacific Islanders comprise the fastest-growing portion of California's population and soon will pass Blacks to become the state's second-largest minority. Asians will comprise 12 to 15 percent of California's population by the year 2000.

While the 1965 law thus produced a dramatic rise in Asian population, the provision prohibiting no more than 20,000 arrivals per nation, in effect, for the first time placed an annual numerical limit on Mexican immigration. Almost simultaneously the Bracero Program was abolished. These legal formalities, however, did not seriously impede passage across the border; they simply assured that a growing percentage of Mexican immigrants would be illegal or undocumented aliens. Along with Mexicans have come increasing numbers of Central and South Americans, particularly people escaping from political upheaval in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Meanwhile, the state continues to attract new residents from Europe, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

California is now America's premier immigrant state, the destination for at least a quarter of all new arrivals to the United States. Foreign immigration will acount for one-third to one-half of the state's total population increase between 1980 and the year 2000, and the great majority of those new residents will be from Latin America or Asia.

California's long heritage of multiethnic migration is thus alive and well. The Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan areas are to the late 20th century what New York was to the late 19th: the primary center of a great wave of new immigration that is changing the face of America.